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Message Text

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ACTION H-01

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 ARA-10 SS-14 /026 W
----------121212 112133Z /64
R 111700Z JAN 78
FM AMEMBASSY PANAMA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5217
INFO AMEMBASSY CARACAS

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 PANAMA 0173

STADIS//

LIMDIS

CARACAS FOR AMBASSADOR VAKY

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: OREP (BAKER, HOWARD)
SUBJECT: CODEL BAKER

REFS: A. PANAMA 080030Z JAN B. PANAMA 0136 C. PANAMA 0160

1. SENATORS BAKER (R-TENN), GARN (R-UTAH) AND CHAFEE (R-RI) VISITED PANAMA JANUARY 3-7. THEY WERE ACCOMPANIED BY FRANK MOORE, ASSISTANT TO PRESIDENT FOR CONGRESSIONAL LIAISON. THEIR PROGRAM INCLUDED THE USUAL STOPS FOR SUCH VISITS -- A LITTLE BARNSTORMING WITH TORRIJOS (COLON, IN THIS CASE) FOLLOWED BY CONVERSATIONS AT HIS FARALLON SEASIDE HOME, A STATE DINNER HOSTED BY PRESIDENT LAKAS, MEETINGS WITH BARLETTA AND OTHER PANAMANIAN GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS, DISCUSSIONS WITH AMERICAN BUSINESSMEN AND WITH CANAL ZONE RESIDENTS, SOUTHCOM AND PANAMA CANAL COMPANY BRIEFINGS, ETC. THE ONLY UNUSUAL ITEM ON THE AGENDA WAS A BRIEFING BY THE PANAMANIAN NATIONAL GUARD GENERAL STAFF--ABOUT WHICH MORE LATER.

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2. DURING THE COUNTRY TEAM BRIEFING THE FIRST DAY, IT BECAME CLEAR WHAT WE HAD-- A YES VOTE (CHAFEE), A NO VOTE (GARN) AND A MAN WHO WAS LOOKING FOR A WAY TO SUPPORT THE TREATY WITHOUT DOING IRREPARABLE DAMAGE TO HIS OWN INTERESTS IN PARTY, SENATE AND COUNTRY. SENATOR BAKER STATED FLATLY THAT IN HIS VIEW THE SENATE WOULD REJECT THE TREATIES UNLESS THEY WERE "AMENDED."

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(THROUGHOUT THE VISIT THE TERMS AMENDMENT, RESERVATION AND UNDERSTANDING WERE USED WITH NO APPARENT EFFORT TO SPECIFY WHAT THEY MEANT.) HE MENTIONED A NUMBER OF THE AMENDMENTS WHICH HAD BEEN PROPOSED BY SENATORS (E.G. NO EXCLUSIVITY FOR PANAMA FOR A SEA-LEVEL CANAL, U.S. MILITARY PRESENCE PAST 1999, EQUAL HONOR FOR THE U.S. FLAG, AND THE POINTS IN THE OCTOBER 14 UNDERSTANDING). HE SAID HIS INTENTION WAS TO EXPLORE GENTLY JUST WHERE TORRIJOS MIGHT BE FLEXIBLE, SO THAT HE WOULD KNOW BETTER WHAT AMENDMENTS MIGHT SAVE THE TREATY, IN ORDER TO AVOID THOSE THAT MIGHT KILL IT. IF TORRIJOS WERE COMPLETELY INFLEXIBLE, THE JIG WAS UP ANYHOW.

3. THE NEXT DAY, WEDNESDAY JANUARY 4, THE SENATORS MET WITH TORRIJOS. IT WENT WELL. SENATOR BAKER EXPLAINED HIS VIEW OF THE SITUATION AND, IN VERY GENERAL TERMS, WHAT IT WOULD TAKE TO GET SENATE APPROVAL. THERE WAS SOME DISCUSSION OF SPECIFICS. THE GENERAL INDICATED BROADLY THAT INCORPORATION OF THE OCTOBER 14 UNDERSTANDING WOULD CAUSE NO GREAT PROBLEM, THAT THE FLAG PROPOSAL WOULD, AND THAT THE SEA-LEVEL CANAL ARTICLE WAS A MATTER OF INDIFFERENCE. TORRIJOS SAID HE WANTED TO AVOID ANOTHER PLEBISCITE, BUT DID NOT RULE OUT ACCEPTANCE OF SOME AMENDMENTS WHICH WOULD NECESSITATE A NEW PLEBISCITE.

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4. THE PRESS CONFERENCE FOLLOWING THE WEDNESDAY MEETING WAS THE FIRST OF THREE OCCASIONS FOR FRICTION BETWEEN TORRIJOS AND SENATOR BAKER. TORRIJOS SPOKE FIRST, AND AN AMERICAN JOURNALIST ASKED IF BAKER HAD SAID AMENDMENT WOULD BE REQUIRED IF THE TREATY WERE TO BE APPROVED. TORRIJOS EQUIVOCATED, THEN DODGED. BAKER TOLD THE PRESS LATER THAT THIS MADE HIM ANGRY. WHEN HIS TURN CAME AT THE CONFERENCE, HE SET THE MATTER STRAIGHT, SUMMARIZING HIS SIDE OF THE CONVERSATION AND THE GENERAL'S "FLEXIBILITY." (PART OF THE PROBLEM SEEMED TO LIE IN THE FACT THAT, UNBEKNOWNST TO OMAR, SENATOR BAKER HAD TOLD THE PRESS THE PREVIOUS NIGHT WHAT HE WAS GOING TO TELL THE GENERAL.)

5. THE NEXT ANOMALY IN THE VISIT OCCURRED THE AFTER-NOON OF FRIDAY, JANUARY 6. MUCH EARLIER THE EMBASSY HAD PROPOSED A MEETING OF THE SENATORS WITH THE NATIONAL GUARD, BUT THE WORD CAME BACK THAT THIS WAS OBVIATED BY THE SENATORS' CALL ON TORRIJOS. FRIDAY MORNING THE GUARD BRASS INDICATED A DESIRE TO GIVE THE SENATORS A BRIEFING--WHICH WAS ACCORDINGLY LAID ON.

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ACTION H-01

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 ARA-10 SS-14 /026 W
----------121273 112132Z /64
R 111700Z JAN 78
FM AMEMBASSY PANAMA
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INFO AMEMBASSY CARACAS

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 PANAMA 0173

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CARACAS FOR AMBASSADOR VAKY

6. THE FIRST TWO-THIRDS OF THE BRIEFING WAS ANODYNE--
A "MILITARY BRIEFING" (POINTER, FLIP CHARTS, ETC.) WITH
ALL THE RIGHT LANGUAGE ABOUT JOINT DEFENSE RESPONSIBILITIES,
AND THEN A FILM ABOUT TRAINING AND CIVIC ACTION. THE
LAST PART OF THE PROGRAM WAS GIVEN BY NATIONAL GUARD
G-2 LT. COL. MANUEL ANTONIO NORIEGA. HE BEGAN BY
LISTING SOME "THREATS" TO THE U.S. IN THE CARIBBEAN
AREA, AMONG THEM THE PANAMA CANAL AREA. HE SAID SUCH
THREATS COULD COME FOR THE USSR, CUBA OR "DOMESTIC
SABOTAGE". HE THEN LISTED SEVERAL "SENSITIVE AREAS"
IN THE CANAL ZONE WHICH WERE VULNERABLE TO SABOTAGE
AND SAID THAT U.S. FORCES ALONE COULD NOT GUARANTEE
THE CANAL'S SECURITY. DEFENSE, HE SAID, MUST BE A
JOINT RESPONSIBILITY WITH "A GOOD NEIGHBOR, WHICH
IS NOT HUMILIATED AND WHICH WANTS TO COOPERATE."
HE THEN PASSED ON TO THE GUARD'S COOPERATION WITH
US IN DRUG TRAFFIC INTERVENTION.

7. FOLLOWING THE TALK NORIEGA TOLD SENATOR BAKER THAT
GENERAL TORRIJOS HAD ASKED HIM TO MAKE HIS PRESENTATION.
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BAKER RESPONDED ICILY: "TELL THE GENERAL I GOT THE MESSAGE." THAT NIGHT BAKER WANTED TO EXPRESS HIS DISPLEASURE TO PANAMANIAN AUTHORITIES, BUT WAS DISSUADED.

8. THE LAST DAY, SATURDAY, ALSO HAD ITS CONTRETEMPS. TORRIJOS WAS TO MEET THE SENATORS AT THE HOTEL NEAR THE AIRPORT AT 10 A.M. FOR A FINAL CONVERSATION. BUT HE CALLED AT THE LAST MINUTE SAYING HIS HELICOPTER HAD A MECHANICAL FAILURE AND URGING THE SENATORS TO RETURN TO FARALLON. SOME SUSPECTED THAT THE INDISPOSITION OF TORRIJOS' HELICOPTER WAS DIPLOMATIC--PERHAPS TO AVOID ANOTHER ENCOUNTER WITH THE PRESS. IN ANY EVENT, THE CONVERSATION TOOK PLACE, THOUGH THE CHANGE OF VENUE CAUSED A TWO-HOUR DELAY IN THE SENATORS' DEPARTURE.

9. THIS FINAL INTERVIEW WAS LARGELY A REPRISE OF THE FIRST. IT TOO WAS CANDID AND AT THE SAME TIME FRIENDLY. SENATOR BAKER REITERATED HIS VIEW THAT CHANGES WOULD BE NEEDED IF THE TREATIES WERE TO PROSPER IN THE SENATE. HE DID NOT GO INTO DETAIL, BUT PROMISED TO GET IN TOUCH WITH TORRIJOS WHEN HE HAD A BETTER FEEL OF THE SENATE'S NEEDS FOR CHANGES. TORRIJOS PROMISED TO TAKE SERIOUSLY ANY CHANGES WHICH SENATOR BAKER MIGHT THINK NECESSARY.

10. AT THE AIRPORT PRESS CONFERENCE BAKER SAID HE WAS PLEASED BY THE PANAMANIANS' FLEXIBILITY AND OPTIMISTIC THAT CHANGES COULD BE MADE WHICH WOULD BE BOTH ACCEPT-ABLE TO PANAMA AND SUFFICIENT TO ASSURE SENATE APPROVAL. SEE REFTEL A.

11. COMMENT: THIS TALK OF TREATY AMENDMENT IS A DANGEROUS BUSINESS. TORRIJOS' COMPLAISANCE WITH
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SENATOR BAKER DOES NOT OBSCURE THE GREAT CONCERN OF PANAMANIANS OVER POSSIBLE AMENDMENT. (SEE REF B.) WE HAVE GIVEN OUR VIEWS ON THIS RECENTLY (SEE REF C.) AND WILL FORBEAR GIVING THEM AGAIN. WE ONLY HOPE THAT NEITHER SENATOR BAKER NOR OTHERS WILL MISTAKE A KILLING AMENDMENT FOR A HEALING AMENDMENT. THE BOTTLES ARE POORLY MARKED.
JORDEN

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: Z
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: n/a
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 11 jan 1978
Decaption Date: 20 Mar 2014
Decaption Note: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978PANAMA00173
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780016-1147
Format: TEL
From: PANAMA
Handling Restrictions:
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780176/aaaacmet.tel
Line Count: 218
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: 5c8eeae4-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION H
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: LIMDIS, STADIS
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 4
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: LIMDIS, STADIS
Reference: 78 PANAMA 80030
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 19 jul 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 3793793
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: CODEL BAKER
TAGS: OREP, (BAKER, HOWARD)
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkvgwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/5c8eeae4-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
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Declassified/Released
US Department of State
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Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014